

A REVIEW OF THE BOOK CHRISTIANITY, SOCIAL TOLERANCE, AND HOMOSEXUALITY
BY JOHN BOSWELL

REVIEW BY ZENO SANTIAGO, MEMBER OF MCC OTTAWA (CANADA)

Boswell's social history traces Western attitudes towards gays from the beginning of the Christian era to the 14th century.

MAIN IDEAS

The book is descriptive. It focuses on intolerance and does not deal with political or military events. Compared to other groups which have been targets of prejudice in Europe, homosexuals have perhaps the longest history of oppression of any. Yet this particular intolerance has scarcely been researched at all. For this reason, the author focuses on homosexuality rather than on any other subject or group. No theory is offered on what causes intolerance, but some generalizations emerge from the text:

- (1) Religious belief is not the cause of intolerance. Rather prejudice is brought into these religions which reject reason as a basis for judgment, or which do not accept tolerance as a value.
- (2) Religious belief becomes then tangled with popular prejudice, and is used in order to justify it. The difference between religion and prejudice only becomes clear when one of the two decreases: e.g. prejudices against women, Jews, blacks, and lending money at interest no longer seek justification today on religious grounds.
- (3) Pretexts for persecution are always based on fear. The group is said to be dangerous, unnatural, and threatening to society, especially to children.
- (4) One book in the Scriptures refers to homosexual acts, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. All else that is said today is due to mistranslations. The New Testament makes no reference at all to premarital sex, procreation, or homosexuality. The issue is fidelity and the use of sex in a non-obsessive way. Divorce is forbidden. Deviations from the original meaning of the Gospels are themselves a product of intolerance.
- (5) The more authoritarian and "turned-inwards" a society is, the more it tends to oppress minority groups, whereas open, diversified and democratic societies do not.
- (6) Historically, intolerance of Jews has tended to occur together with the intolerance of gays.

ABSTRACT

Homosexuality was practiced, and accepted as a matter of course, by Christians and non-Christians alike in Greece, Rome, and the Near East during the early Christian era. Homosexual marriage was recognized as valid in law by Rome until 342 C.E. (A.D.). Homosexual prostitutes plied their trade and were taxed by the state. Early Christian theology paid little attention to homosexuality. Some theologians were gay themselves. Intolerance began to grow in the Roman state after the 4th century. As decline set in, Rome became more provincial and imperial tyranny increased. Homosexuality and adultery were outlawed in 533 without any consultation with the Church. Indeed, the first recorded victims of this new trend were the bishops of Rhodes and Diospolis. Except for the Visigothic Code, the laws and customs of the Barbarian invaders either honored homosexuality or ignored it. The Church, however, treated it lightly. But civil intolerance grew as Rome fell, the Saracens conquered Spain, and many small, rural, xenophobic societies replaced the Empire. Around the 10th and 11th centuries, artisan production and the growth of trade led to the rebirth of cities, bringing a period of great acceptance and diversity in a context of urban self-government. Homosexual love literature flourished. Kings, cardinals, and bishops were known and accepted as gay. Yet this was also a period of high papal moral prestige and Church reforms.



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The resurgence of secular absolutism, the growth of asceticism, emerging problems with widespread poverty, and codification of civil and canon law between the 12th and 14th centuries coincided with growing oppression of Jews, homosexuals, Muslims, and other minorities. The First Crusade was triggered by a counterfeit letter supposedly written by a Christian king in the East, accusing the Muslims of all sorts of vices, including homosexuality. The Third Lateran Council (1179) followed the secular trend and for the first time in Christian history issued injunctions against lending money at interest, and against Muslims, heretics, gays, and Jews - even though the Papal household was run by Jews. Homosexuality became a sin. Lateran IV (1215) ordered Jews to wear distinctive clothing, but did not mention gays. As the 13th century advanced, Church and secular legislation was produced in unprecedented quantity, regulating most aspects of public and private life. The first wars of religion took place. The anti-homosexual prejudices of the time were brought into theology and given great prestige by St. Thomas Aquinas, who also declared that women were by God's will inferior to men. Throughout Europe homosexuals were seen as heretics, and subjected to extremely severe treatment. Jews were expelled from England first, then France (14th century), Germany (15th century), and finally Spain (1492), which had also been the last country of Europe to tolerate homosexuality. Intolerance was perpetuated by its inclusion into theological, moral, and legal codes written at that time, which continued to influence Europe for centuries.

APPENDICES

The book contains an appendix, "Lexicography and Saint Paul", which clarifies the meaning of the Pauline letters supposedly condemning homosexuality (1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10, and Romans 1:26-27). The author concludes that these texts have been mistranslated from the Greek. Another appendix includes original translations from theological and secular sources, both Greek and Latin. Extensive bibliography.

COMMENTS

This book is not easy reading. But it is worth the effort to read it. The institutionalized Church is shown to have lost sight of Christ's message of love, and to have been content to trail behind (and give sanction to) secular vagaries, rather than to fulfill its role of guardian of the Christian moral framework. The whimsy and limitations of scholars are exposed. Roman Catholics will be fascinated by the discussion on St. Thomas Aquinas, noting that Thomism was declared to be the official philosophy of the Roman Church as recently as 1879 by Leo XIII. It is also surprising to learn that Saint Anselm of Canterbury, one of the founders of Scholasticism, composed love poems to two of his monks. As for secular historical figures, it is entertaining to read of the great love between Richard the Lion-Hearted and Philip of France, as it is sobering to learn of the horrible death inflicted on Edward II, England's last acknowledged gay king. There are many poems, sometimes in their entirety, and side-line disclosures, such as the fact that the Rubaiyat contain love poems from a man to another male whose gender was purposefully switched in the English translation. The author makes no secret of his sympathies, and some may say this mars his contribution. But the contribution is indeed great. This book is unique in the English language.

A REPRINT FROM THE GAY CHRISTIAN, FOURTH QUARTER 1980

Boswell: a new standard of excellence

By THE EDITOR, F. JAY DEACON

John Boswell. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980. Illustrated. 424 pp. \$27.50.

I SUSPECT THAT IT was at just the right time when, this past Fall, John Boswell's towering work of scholarship finally emerged from many years' preparation—to face wide critical acclaim.

The painstaking and scrupulous research that culminates in the publication of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* extended literally to the last detail. I used to call Boswell periodically to inquire whether his book might soon appear. Three years ago, he told me he was nearly finished—given a little more work on indexing and footnotes. Both, incidentally, justify the delay: readers skipping the page-bottom footnotes will miss much of the best material.

Long before those final technical labors, there were two years poking around European archives, and prodigious translating of little-known texts available in American libraries—for Boswell, at Harvard, where he studied, and at Yale, where, at 33, he teaches medieval history.

Which, as I have suggested, couldn't have been a more timely effort. The social, religious, and political fortunes of gay people (that is what he calls them—a first in scholarly writing) are subject to precipitous change, as will be seen. Today, the jury is out. Gay/lesbian progress against ancient prejudice is evident in religious institutions, where it seems to have hit upon a limit; and in the public media,

where for the first time in modern history, gay/lesbian people appear as human beings. Yet small political gains may now be reversed as civil rights in America become more annoyance than urgency. There is no telling where religious institutions may go with the issues of sexuality and homosexuality.

Maybe they'll read Boswell. If there is any progress now, it will be because of his unassailable scholarship. From now on, it will be hard for the bishops, the TV evangelists, the reactionary politicians and those alleging learning to argue as they have with a straight face.

The historical reconstruction is begun with the announcement that this is a tough job just begun with much more terrain to be explored, and proceeds to the debunking of a few popular distortions about Roman history. Homosexual practices were not illegal, he asserts, but easily integrated into the life of the Republic. And in the Empire, the first legal actions against homosexual behavior "can be dated precisely to the third century A.D., when a series of laws was enacted regulating various aspects of homosexual relations, ranging from the statutory rape of minors to gay marriage" (70f). Not until the sixth century were homosexual relations categorically prohibited.

Until the time of this legislation, attempts were made to sway public opinion and policy against the easy acceptance gay people found, but these were almost universally unsuccessful. Gay emperors, bishops and monks, soldiers, common citizens, and divinities flourished. In matters of sexuality, the sex of one's partner was of monumental indifference. Statues of Antinous, lover of Hadrian, the most outstanding of the "five good em-

perors" (117-38), dotted the ancient world—and the enormous appeal of their love shows up in fiction, poetry, coinage, architecture, and art. But the decline of the Empire and its great urban centers would eventually dampen the expansive spirit of Rome.

Another inaccuracy set right: that homosexuality had something to do with the fall of Rome. Bishops seem especially to love this one, but Boswell demonstrates that instead, the deterioration of Rome's vitality had something to do with fear and repression aimed at minorities.

Hostility to gay/lesbian people and homosexual behavior first arose on a massive scale during the period of the dissolution of the Roman state from the third to the sixth centuries, as urban culture fell apart and repressive government sought desperately to exert power by curbing nonconformity, legislating morality, and seeking scapegoats. But the revival of urban life restored gay culture, too. By the eleventh century there again appeared gay literature, a visible and substantial gay minority, and prominent gay people in all levels of church and society.

Then, abruptly, a general increase in intolerance toward minorities and a rise in coerced conformity resulted in a violent shift in the status of gay people. For the causes of this change Boswell cannot fully account. But the effects remain with us: until the present century, gay culture was unable to reassert itself. Boswell summarizes:

During the 200 years from 1150 to 1350, homosexual behavior appears to have changed, in the eyes of the public, from the personal preference of a prosperous minority, satirized

and celebrated in popular verse, to a dangerous, antisocial, and severely sinful aberration. Around 1100, the efforts of prominent churchmen liked and respected by the pope could not prevent the election and consecration as bishop of a person well known to be leading a gay life-style, and much of popular literature of the day—often written by bishops and priests—dealt with gay love, gay life-styles, and a distinct gay subculture. By 1300, not only had overtly gay literature all but vanished from the face of Europe, but a single homosexual act was enough to prevent absolutely ordination to any clerical rank, to render one liable to prosecution by ecclesiastical courts or—in many places—to merit the death penalty.

The reference is to Ralph, Archbishop of Tours, who persuaded the king of France to install as Bishop of Orleans Ralph's lover John. Despite appeals to Pope Urban II to block the appointment, John was consecrated on March 1, 1098 and served with distinction for forty years.

Anti-homosexual voices were raised, and Boswell tracks them, too, engaging their theological arguments sometimes at length—e.g., Anselm and Aquinas. And, as has been said, stormclouds appeared. Finally, even kings were not safe from the gathering fury. There is the story of King Edward II of England, murdered by the insertion into his anus of a red-hot poker; and of his lover of thirteen years, Piers Gaveston, first exiled by Edward I and the, after Edward II recalled him, exiled twice more by Parliament, and finally tortured (his genitals cut off and publicly burned) and then decapitated—or so the best available description of Gaveston's end goes.

Professor Boswell examines these developments against persuasive evidence that the earliest church had nothing to say about homosexuality per se; that none of the most prominent or influential Christian writers considered homosexual attraction “unnatural;” that none of these writers sought to marshal teachings of Jesus or his early followers as objections to physical expression of homosexual feelings. It must be supposed that later biblical arguments against homosexuality are manufactured ammunition for a hatred whose origins must be sought elsewhere—or against some enemy who must tactically be accused of something shocking.

The time of the Crusades illustrates: Islam had practiced a relative tolerance of

homosexuality—never a topic of early Christian anti-Muslim polemic. Now, Muslims were widely characterized as sexually degenerate and given to unrestrained homosexuality. The caricature was more effective if homosexuality could be made out to be shocking.

Meanwhile, all minorities became scapegoats. The Third Lateran Council (1179) both became the first ecumenical council to rule against homosexual acts, and issues a series of statutes to curb Jewish economic and civil power. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) struck Jews with sweeping prohibitions against social interaction and economic participation. In this climate, religious and biblical arguments against homosexuality were crafted.

These Boswell examines. He devotes an 18-page appendix to the lexicography of Paul. Here, we learn more about “malakoi” and “arsenokoitai,” words that have bedeviled biblical interpreters for years (and with which interpreters have bedeviled gay people), that we have previously read in all popularly accessible sources available until now.

His 27-page chapter on the Scriptures is good enough, though not the strength of the book. Here, Boswell falls into the gratuitous defense of the indefensible position pioneered by Derrick Sherwin Bailey and promoted by McNeill that the verb “to know” (*yadha*) in the Gen. 19 Sodom narrative is no sexual reference. He unaccountably defies the basic hermeneutic rule that the first clue to the meaning of a word is its immediate context, and the second its usage in a parallel pericope. In Gen. 19:8, just three verses after the reference in question, the sexual meaning is unambiguous: two daughters who have not “known” man. The obvious parallel is Jud. 19, where, in a remarkably similar scenario, there appears this: “Bring out the man who came into your house, that we may know him” (v. 22), and “the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them: and they knew her” (v. 25), in the context of an invitation to “ravish” both her and the host's virgin daughter, so long as the male guest be left unmolested. Our scholarly friends ought to quit the hopeless argument that *yadha* is not a sexual reference and instead argue the obvious: in Gen. 19, it's homosexual rape, just as it is heterosexual rape in Jud. 19. In both cases the issue is coercion. In both cases there's little concern about the sex of the rapee. More important, in both cases there is contempt for women, even one's own daughter, whereas absolute dignity is afforded the male guest. Biblical sexism

and mysogyny is no adequate basis for a modern ethic!

Terms and concepts Boswell explores in more or less depth include “nature,” “abomination,” temple prostitute, effeminacy, “gay,” and the linkage between homosexuality and heresy.

Maybe the finest joy of these 424 pages of brilliance is Boswell's citing of gay literature, much of it never before published—not, at least, accurately translated. There is the Roman myth of gay Ganymede, and there are love poems. Like this one by Hilary the Englishman, addressed in the Twelfth Century to an English boy:

*Beautiful boy, flower fair,
Glittering jewel, if only you knew
That the loveliness of your face
Was the torch of my love.*

*The moment I saw you,
Cupid struck me; but I hesitate,
For my Dido holds me,
And I fear her wrath.*

“Boy” doesn't quite mean child: it's applied affectionately to adults. Boswell's command of English, of Provencal, and Latin, and Hebrew, and Greek, and Arabic, and French, and a multitude of other languages, assures that the footnotes are loaded with clues about the nuance of this or that word. He also provides samples of anti-homosexual writings, some of which feature curious arguments about Hyenas, alleged to grow new anuses every year so as to engage in homosexual intercourse, or, variously, to the effect that animals do not engage in homosexual intercourse, so, of course, such behavior among humans is “against nature.” And there's commentary on the way things were, more or less neutrally offered. Like this, also from Hilary's pen:

*The pope's organ misses nothing:
boys and girls please the pope. Old
men and old women please the pope.*

The New York Times Book Review, whose editors list *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* among their “eleven best books of the year,” began its August 10 review thus: “John Boswell restores one's faith in scholarship . . . I would not hesitate to call his book revolutionary, for it sets a standard of excellence that one would have thought impossible in the treatment of an issue so large, uncharted and vexed.”

To which TGC gratefully says, Amen. We are indebted.

There is a temptation, as we struggle against the injustice in our world, to isolate our struggle and to believe that it has no connection with the struggle of our sister or brother. They may very well be experiencing injustice but we perceive that as being in another form and having no relationship to our own experience. What, for example, does the struggle of women have in common with the experiences of a gay male? I believe that they have plenty in common. The face of oppression may differ but the stuff of which it is made is the same. The oppression of women and of gay males had, in fact, so much in common in its history the inter-relationship of the two can not be ignored if we are to break the oppression.

St. Augustine of Hippo expressed the predominate attitude of his time when he said that homosexuality was bad because it was, "a man using his body as that of a woman." He added that, "the body of man is as superior to that of a woman as the soul is to the body." [1] What is very blatantly being said in the Christian tradition, and I argue that it comes from Roman Stoicism, is that man is superior to woman. The belief is that just the male body is superior. That is definitely a reflection of the Greeks. Augustine, with male superiority in mind, expresses his horror for a man using his body as that of a woman. Augustine offered to us a hierarchical view of creation. The divine, which is reason, is on top. A man, who is capable of reason is on top. Women, who are perceived as very emotional and may in their passions let their logic and reason slip, are placed underneath men. Then in this structure, children come underneath women and then the animals and plants, etc.

What Augustine very simply was saying to us was that for a man to make love to another man is to use his body as that of a woman voluntarily lowering himself to second-class citizenship therefore moving away from God. If a man acts like a woman, and woman is farther away than man from God, then a man is moving away from God and that is sin. Now that is why homosexuality was considered sin, because it was a man acting like a woman.

Now I offer to you — If it is okay to be a woman then what is wrong with being a gay man? Nothing, that is

precisely my point. If it is good and a righteous and a God-given thing to be a woman, to be of the divine feminine, that changes things. It then becomes a good and righteous thing to be a gay man. In that case if you are a man, even if you are acting like a woman, so what? When women are thought of as good and righteous it is no longer thought of as moving away from God for a man to "act like a woman."

Have you ever noticed that we don't get nearly so upset when women dress in men's clothes as we do when men dress in women's clothes? Notice the change in reaction. It has always been that way. Society has never perceived of lesbians as being as "bad" as gay men because lesbians were women who were trying to act like men, "poor darlings." "They just don't have what it takes," would be the societal reaction, "at least they are trying; at least they acknowledge that it is better to be like a man than like a woman." The reaction to men dressed in women's clothes would be much different, "How dare they."

The source of our oppression is the oppression of women. Those of us who stand and fight and oppose sexist attitudes are fighting for ourselves if we are gay or lesbian. If you are a gay man your freedom is tied very much to the freedom of women. If you think that you are going to get out of the sewer of oppression before women do you are fooling yourself. You are underneath women on the hierarchical system that society has created. The only way that you are going to get out of that gutter is to lift everyone else up in front of you.

1. Augustine, *Contra Mendacium* 7.10 (PL. 40:496) as quoted by John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill., 1980) p. 157.

Editor's note: The following is excerpted from a tape of a workshop: A History of Lesbians and Gays in the Faith Community by the Reverend Sherre Boothman, Dean of Samaritan Educational Ministries.

THE SAME STRUGGLE

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Liberty of spirit, that is to say, potency of intellect, is measured by the capacity to dissociate ideas traditionally inseparable.

-Jose Ortega Y Gasset: *La Rebelion de las masas*

Beyond clichés:

A history of lesbian oppression

MARIANNE VAN FOSSEN

FOR MANY YEARS I accepted without question an oral tradition that tied the cause of lesbian oppression in the United States primarily to sexual preference and secondarily to gender. I believed simultaneously the clichés "we were burned at the stake" and "we were ignored." These apparently contradictory statements hold in tension the essence of the limitation of all women within Western androcentric hegemony. A historical analysis of lesbian oppression reveals this tension and inextricably ties the limitation of women's erotic options to all other restrictions imposed on women.

In her overview of Lesbian American History, Lisa Duggan points out that in order to understand the oppression of the lesbian in the United States it is necessary to examine the background of influences shaping the attitudes of the population. A complete study would therefore include an analysis of African, Native American and European tradition.¹ Since little information is available on African attitudes, and since both African and Native American cultures were drastically altered by contact with European culture, this survey will focus on Western attitudes towards women and lesbian practice.

Prior to the common era and the beginnings of Christianity, lesbian practice was either not taken seriously or ignored. Jane Rule in *Lesbian Images* states that while there is much evidence of male homosexuality in Ancient Greece, there is little direct evidence of lesbianism. Male same sex relations were considered the highest expressions of love in that they were not tainted by what the Greeks considered as the ulterior motive of reproduction. Heterosexual intercourse to procreate was performed as a duty to the state. However, Rule writes:

What the Greeks felt about lesbian practice is not . . . well documented, except what can be pieced together of Sappho's life and work.

Rule feels that since the sexes were largely segregated and considering the evidence of Sappho's erotic attachments to her students in her school for women on the Island of Lesbos, "ancient Greece was obviously a bisexual culture" for women and men.²

In the Middle East, Rule reports that many countries viewed homosexuality as a matter of "taste and custom."³ Male homosexuality was in some countries completely acceptable. Lesbianism in these extreme patriarchies was not a problematical phenomenon, since the choice of a woman for a woman was considered a lesser choice, expedient if no men were available.⁴

But Israel did not accept male homosexuality. Israel was a tribal nomadic nation longer than other ancient societies, and thus was more concerned with survival. Since fertility was thought to rest in the male, same sex relations between men were felt to endanger tribal survival, and were condemned as was "any strong pleasure which could distract people from vigilance."⁵

Additionally, male homosexual practice was associated with various pagan cultures surrounding Israel, and against which the Israelites struggled to keep their territory and their identity.

But there are no laws against lesbian practice in the Hebrew Scriptures. Women were completely subjugated and indeed were chattel in Ancient Israel: Their behavior was not monitored by legal statutes except when it violated male property rights, as in the cases of adultery.⁶ According to Rule, only in later rabbinical law are there found proscriptions against lesbian practice: "Male homosexuals were still stoned to death while lesbians were simply disqualified from marriage with a priest."⁷

Sodom and Gomorrah, used for centuries to legitimate persecution of homosexual men and women, was originally

a story of "admonition against all sins of excess and idolatry as well as a moral explanation of the disaster of cities actually destroyed by earthquake and fire."⁸ It was not until the second century BCE in other Hebrew writings that male homosexual acts became regarded as the cause of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. At that time, Hellenic culture was being brutally insinuated and "the Jews were again fighting to preserve their culture."

That Paul, in his concern for the spiritual and rejection of the sexual, included lesbian practice in the one possible New Testament reference to that activity is debatable given the ambiguity of Romans 1:26-27. However, early Christians were accused of immoral behavior that included male and female sexual expressions of love: Christian behavioral doctrine therefore became rigid, and "Jesus' doctrine of love became a doctrine of chastity."⁹

Medieval Christian attitudes on sexuality are rooted firmly in neo-Platonism. As McNeill points out in *The Church and the Homosexual*, "the early Fathers of the Church tended to accept the platonic and stoic body-mind dualism." The male principle, reason, is identified with the soul, and the female principle with the body. Women are subordinate to men in that reason is more spiritual, more pure, than the body. Women became responsible for the Fall, and Eve became the great temptress.¹⁰

Churchmen, concerned with women's sexuality, turned their attention specifically to lesbians. John Chrysthom

thought lesbian practice even more disgraceful than homosexuality among men because women should have more shame than men, presumably because women were sexually responsible for the Fall.

That lesbian practice was formerly ignored is explicitly reflected in a letter from Augustine to his sister, a superior of a religious order:

erotic play among women, before not taken all that seriously, must now be raised to the level of sin, not just for nuns but for lay women as well.

Accordingly, the Council in Paris of 1212 made it illegal for nuns to sleep together and demanded that lamps be lit all night as safeguards against this "erotic play" of women.¹¹

Penances were developed since lesbian practice was now raised to the level of sin.¹² Rule reports penances of three years for lay women and seven years for nuns.¹³ D. S. Bailey describes the various Penitentials which were handbooks for confessors, and his discussion makes it obvious that men received harsher penances than women, and that many handbooks did not list lesbian practice.¹⁴ However, what references exist do point out that Neoplatonic ideas of sexuality ended the relative silence surrounding lesbian practice.

That the silence was utterly shattered is exemplified by a legal code of Orleans, France written in 1260 which prescribes the following punishments for genital activity between women:

The woman who does this shall undergo mutilation for the first and second offenses and on her third must be burnt . . . And all the goods of such offenders shall be the King's. 14

The church did not execute these punishments, the first of which was clitorrectomy, but turned offenders over to the state for punishment.¹⁵

At the time of this law and much harsher ones against males, heresy was rampant in the church.¹⁶ The most widespread heresies originated in Zoroastrianism, which according to Rule "was more tolerant of sexual behavior not associated with procreation."¹⁷ Anything material, including the body, was evil. Not to procreate was to limit the amount of evil in the world.

Because of their attitudes, heretics were accused of various immoral acts. Indeed, "lesbian practice was associated with heretical belief." If the Inquisition's records are correct, many medieval women were lesbians. A truth test called the Judgement of God attempted to gauge the veracity of the accused by handing her a red-hot bar -- if she was lying, her hand burned.¹⁸ But if the Inquisitors based their records on confessions gained in this manner, there is no way to determine who were lesbians and who were not. When the social order was threatened, as it was by the prevalence of heresy, a woman neither

heretic nor lesbian could have been destroyed as such.

After raging against heresy and heretics, the church began its 13th through 18th century persecution of women as witches. While excerpts from the "Malleus Maleficarum," an inquisitor's handbook, do not directly refer to lesbianism, certainly the hysterical fear of women's sexuality described in this document deserves further investigation.¹⁹

As seen in this brief overview of Western lesbian oppression through the Middle Ages, lesbian practice was first ignored, and later declared sinful.²⁰ When that sin was linked to heresy or possibly witchcraft, lesbians were persecuted as a class. Any women who stepped away from the norm of religious belief could be persecuted: Unimaginably large numbers of women were tortured and murdered during the Inquisition and witch hunts.²¹ Given methods used to extract confessions, many women confessed to acts they had never committed. All women destroyed were in a sense victims of lesbian oppression.

History is not to be tied neatly in a package. Certainly more research is needed in the areas mentioned if definitive correlations can be drawn between the stability of the social order and violent attacks on women. However, patterns do seem to emerge within even the small amount of information accumulated. Patterns of silence and horror that affect all women, silence when the social order is not shaken, horror when its peripheries tremble; silence and horror that traveled with this country's settlers and continues into the present.

Lisa Duggan describes the amount of available data on the colonial period succinctly: "The historical evidence pertaining to lesbian activity includes one law, one legal case and several cases of female transvestites."²² The New Haven Colony in 1655 was the only colony to legislate against lesbian practice, prescribing the death penalty.²³

Deborah Sampson in 1782 dressed as a man and fought in the Revolutionary War. Her true gender was discovered when she was treated for battle wounds. In a semi-fictionalized biography of 1797 Herman Mann suggests that she wooed her own sex during her transvestite period. Mann wrote that Sampson's activities were out of "sentiment, taste, purity; as animal love, on her part, was out of the question." Mann continues later

. . . to mention the intercourse of our Heroine with her sex, would, like others more dangerous, require an apology I know not how to make. It must be supposed, she acted more from necessity than a voluntary impulse of passion, and no doubt succeeded beyond her expectations or desires. Harmless thing. An inoffensive companion in love!

While there is no way to prove the accuracy of Mann's suggestions, "their very existence in a book subscribed to by respectable New Englanders in the late 1700's is of interest."²⁴

Sampson stepped completely out of her role by dressing as a man and fighting in a war. By so doing, she was suspected of lesbianism by at least one writer. The fact that Mann is moved to excuse Sampson, that he calls her activities "harmless" and that later he supports her and exonerates the women she attracted by writing that "she acted in the deportment of that male sex," illustrates the biographer's prejudice and chauvinism.²⁵ Sampson was sensationally accused of at least romantic pursuit of women, patted on the back for it as one of the boys because she acted like a man and men were to be emulated, her companions left off the hook because of course she acted like a man!

The only other reference Katz reports from the late 18th century is from Moreau de St. Mery, a French lawyer who lived mostly in Philadelphia, from 1793 to 1798. In reporting on mores in Philadelphia he writes,

I am going to say something that is almost unbelievable. These women, without real love and without passions, give themselves up at an early age to the enjoyment of themselves, and they are not at all stranger to being unwilling to seek unnatural pleasure with persons of their own sex. 26

Women who chose each other as lovers were not considered capable of real love by St. Mery. It was an insult to male superiority.

But male superiority was not totally shattered by the Passing Women of American History. Sampson as mentioned above is one of the first such women reported. Female transvestism in the United States a complex life style. For some women, that life style was a feminist stance; for others, a form of economic survival; and for still others a method of coping with erotic preference for women.

Towards the turn of the 19th century Murray Hall, one of the many women cited by Katz, lead completely the life of a male politician in New York City.²⁷ She vote was married twice to women who careful

guarded her secret, had marital troubles because of her flirtations with other women, adopted a daughter, drank and smoked cigars and was a bail bondsman.²⁸ What is fascinating besides the success of her disguise is the reaction of the men she knew when they learned her secret after her death. Those quoted in a 1901 *New York Times* article reveal more astonished respect than abhorrence. A local politician comments:

A woman? Why, he'd line up to the bar and take his whisky like any other veteran and didn't make faces over it, either. If he was a woman, he ought to have been a man, for he lived and looked like one.²⁹

All the men interviewed seem to regard Murray Hill with similar respect. It seems that one who tries to be a man does not reject men so utterly as one who wishes to be a self-identified woman, and move outside of a preordained set of behavior.

While women remained within preordained sets such as marriage or father-controlled spinsterism, their relationships with other women were not monitored. Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, in her classic article, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relationships between Women in Nineteenth Century America," describes the intense relationships that existed between most women in that century. The nature of these relationships, she writes

ranges from the supportive love of sisters, through the enthusiasm of adolescent girls, to sensual avowals of love by mature women.³⁰

That women began to police their relationships and restrict their feelings for each other was sensed by Smith-Rosenberg who writes

It is possible to speculate that in the Twentieth Century a number of cultural taboos evolved to cut short the homosocial ties of girlhood and to impel the emerging women of thirteen or fourteen toward heterosexual relationships.³¹

No longer speculation, it is apparent that negative attitudes towards relationships between women became pronounced and were internalized by women at the end of the 19th century.

At that time, the oppression of lesbians and gay men had new champions -- European and American members of the medical profession. Punishment became treatment; homosexuality became an illness to be cured or controlled. Among the cures attempted were clitorrectomy, hyster-

ectomy, lobotomy, chemical-shock and electro-shock.³² The words of these men echo those of medieval theologians.³³ For example the German clinician Kraft-Ebing in *Psychopathia Sexualis* believes

every expression of the sexual instinct that does not correspond with the purpose of nature ie propagation must be regarded as perverse.³⁴

One of the pioneers of this field of study for doctors, Kraft-Ebing did not think there was much proof of homosexuality in women.³⁵

Westphal, in 1870, is the first physician to deal with lesbians in detail, giving a case history of a lesbian transvestite he describes as a congenital invert, a term used at the time to describe homosexuals. Westphal insisted that "homosexuality was primarily and simply a biological phenomenon," and did not think it could be cured. He also, according to Rule, "identified a thoroughly feminine group of female inverts, which his colleagues did not recognize since their acceptance depended on evidence of inversion in secondary sexual characteristics."³⁶

One of his contemporaries was Havelock Ellis, who felt along with Kraft-Ebing that there was a difference between homosexuality and homosexual acts. The invert was tainted with damaged genes yet at the same time was pathological. Female congenital inverts were considered seducers of the innocent, caused suicides, were murderers and were transvestite. They were all said to be masculine, even if that masculinity was only revealed in their pursuit of women. Women who were not inverts but made love to other women were considered normal in that the inversion would most certainly be dropped as soon as a man became interested.³⁷

That women's relationships became suspect with the rise of feminism is very dramatically delineated by Nancy Sahli. Women's relationships were "subjected to increasing stress after about 1875." At that time

prescriptions for female behavior changed; indeed a new definition of what constituted "normal" female relationships developed in both America and Europe.

She quotes the personal letters of Anna Dickinson between 1863 and the 1870's to illustrate this change. One letter from a woman to Dickinson reads

You are mine, and belong to me until you get married -- say it's true. I have an irresistible desire through this letter to make love to you.

This type of correspondence and equally passionate replies of Dickinson become rarer as time progresses. Her letters in the 70's appear to be "rhetorically self-conscious rather than inordinately emotional in their language." This does not necessarily mean that her relationships changed, but that perhaps she was becoming self-conscious about their intensity.³⁸

Both Faederman and Sahli discuss courtship rituals carried out by the majority of women students and teachers in women's colleges.³⁹ One woman, attracted by the physical form of the other, would send the object of her affection cards, letters, candy and flowers, etc. until the recipient was "smashed" or "had a rave." The first reports of the research committee of the early form of the American Association of University Women in 1885 included documents objecting to smashing, in that women were falling behind in their studies, mooning around, disrupting classes and being emotional over each other in ways that interrupted one woman's school work for an entire year.

This research was for a report on the *Health Statistics of Women College Graduates*. It was a response to a popular theory put forward by E. H. Clarke who in his 1873 book, *Sex and Education*,⁴⁰ said that not bearing children and concentrating on education caused "energy to be deflected from the womb to the brain," which caused "acute or chronic diseases." One such disease was the "hermaphroditic condition that sometimes accompanies spinsterism" as an "Amazonian coarseness and face." He compares educated women to the "sexless class of termites." The report proved Clarke wrong by showing statistically that women's health was not impaired by education.⁴¹ However, the early researchers did not put their findings on smashing in the final report: Emotionalism was found to be detrimental to the development of rational skills in young women.

These intense relationships among young women also attracted the attention of Havelock Ellis, who cautions

conventional propriety recognizes a considerable degree of physical intimacy between girls, thus at once encouraging and cloaking the manifestations of homosexuality.⁴²

That women's sexuality was receiving a great deal of attention in this period is dramatically indicated by the first two editions of the *Index Catalogue of the Library of the Surgeon General's Office, United States Army*. In the series published

between 1880 and 1895 there were 30 books and 100 articles on inversion. In contrast, the series published between 1896 and 1919 under the category women had several sub-headings referring to sexual instinct. Sexual instinct (inversion of) had a listing of 36 books and 228 articles, and sexual instinct (perversion of) had a listing of 26 books and 300 articles.

That inversion was linked to feminism is explicitly seen in the work of Ellis who felt, according to Sahli, that

lesbianism is a highly contagious disease to which feminists and other independent, autonomous women are particularly susceptible.

Similarly, the author of the preface to the Henry James novel about the feminist movement *The Bostonians* published in 1886 lists the characteristic of the novel that upset him most as "the emotional economy of the Lesbian woman." According to Sahli, lesbian practice is not mentioned in the novel. She writes

The point is not whether the women were really lesbians, but that they were called lesbians on the basis of their autonomous behavior.⁴³

Many factors contributed to the existence of new pressures on women's behavior. Emphasis on rationality and what Sahli tantalizingly refers to as an "intense religiosity" on the part of many Suffragists that led them to "define their love for women as a spiritual force," contributed to

the feminist movements own subversion of the heightened emotional commitment which had typified women's relationships for most of the 19th Century.

Feminism, on the rise and growing stronger in this half of the 19th century drew the attacks of doctors who "assumed roles of definers and arbiters of the acceptable and desirable."⁴⁴ As the system was threatened by feminism, the empowering relationships were controlled.

Duggan points out that prior to the end of the 19th century there was no concept of "homosexuality but rather only specific sexual acts which any person might commit which were forbidden and punished."⁴⁵ Kraft-Ebing, Ellis and others were the originators of ideas of lesbian practice as a pathological or congenital trait. The move from sin to crime to illness caused lesbians and gay men to be classified for the first time. Focusing on

lesbians and gay men as an "effected" group created a climate whereby class consciousness became possible.⁴⁶

Accordingly, lesbians and gay men are allies, a special class. Since on the surface it appeared that both men and women were persecuted for genital activity, gay men's history became lesbian history. Similarly, anything male was thought to be universal; men's circumstance became women's circumstance. The contradictory cliches "we were burned" and "we were ignored" are both true, but we were not burned as gay men were burned. Gay men's persecution is primarily based on their genital activity, in that their sexual expression involved a lowering of status that insults male superiority. Lesbians were both burned and ignored because we were women. Given our common oppressor, the Western androcentric hegemony, we share much with gay men. For lesbians to refuse alliance with gay men, given the commonality of oppression, is as divisive as lesbians refusing alliances with women who enjoy heterosexual privilege.

The amount of debate engendered by Smith-Rosenberg's article on whether the relationships she describes were lesbian is indicative to me of the devastating results of male society's reactions to those relationships when they became a source of empowerment for women. Smith-Rosenberg urges that these relationships, while homo-social and homo-erotic, should not be labeled with 20th century psycho-sexual terminology, but rather viewed strictly in the context of their culture.⁴⁷ On the other side of the debate are those such as Blanche Weisen Cook who would name many of these relationships lesbian, her definition of the term being

women who love women who choose to nurture and support and to create a living environment in which to work creatively, are lesbian.⁴⁸

Cook's definition redefines lesbians as woman-centered women, regardless of genital activity.

If such activity was the chief source of lesbian oppression historically, then Cook's definition would be irrelevant and one would be forced to search continually for evidence of genital contact. But this contact was not the ultimate focus of oppression. It was only when women in general became viewed as evil and thought to threaten the social structure that lesbianism became a sin, as seen in the analysis of European traditions above. Male homosexuals were and are persecuted for

genital activity consistently, but women are persecuted only when the patriarchy is threatened by changes in women's behavior.

Similarly, while further research is needed, there seems to be a connection between the decline of feminism in the first decades of the 20th century and the policing of women's relationships. When women's source of empowerment became suspect, women became divided in their relationships and isolated from each other. This polarization of women into lesbians and non-lesbians was created by theories of congenital inversions that continue to divide women.

To call oneself a lesbian is a political act. Women who are not lesbian, or who do not claim the lesbian part of their identity enjoy heterosexual privilege. For the latter, privilege is exchanged for wholeness and honesty; stability for risk and uncertainty. To refuse alliance with heterosexual or bisexual or closeted women is to ignore our common history. While lesbians need space and time together, perhaps we need to be cautious about how we isolate women who share our vision but not our motivation or courage.

This survey does not tell our story; it tells the story of what happened to us, and why. We would prefer to ignore that story, but we are better able to confront that which would deny or destroy us if we understand its tactics. Our strategies informed by history then can move beyond reaction to attack.

But we need to know more than when we were burned, why we were ignored, or how we have been divided. We need to hear of the laughter that ripples through time, the tenderness, the passion of love. We need to know about relationships that empowered, about women who fought bravely a monolithic structure. We need to recover our past, to unstop silenced voices. It is to this work I now turn my attention, having gone beyond cliches and examined a history inseparable from the history of all women.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Lisa Duggan, "Lesbianism and American History: A Brief Source Review." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*. Volume IV, No. 3 (Fall 1979), p. 81.
- 2 Jane Rule, *Lesbian Images*. (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), p. 15.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 16-17.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 6 Phyllis Tribble, "Women in the Old

- Testament." *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Supplementary Volume. Edited by Keith Crim, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), p. 964.
- ⁷ Rule, pp. 18-19.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 19.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 21.
- ¹⁰ John McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*. (New York: Pocket Books, 1976).
- ¹¹ Rule, p. 22.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 23.
- ¹³ D. S. Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Tradition*. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1955), pp. 100-110.
- ¹⁴ Bailey, p. 142.
- ¹⁵ Rule, p. 23.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 23-24.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, p. 24.
- ¹⁹ E. Clark and H. Richardson, editors. *Women and Religion*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 116-130.
- ²⁰ Homosexual acts continued to be regarded as sinful and punished by law through the Reformation. Unfortunately, sources examined are not specific about attitudes against lesbian practice in this time period.
- ²¹ Clarke and Richardson, p. 116.
- ²² Duggan, p. 81.
- ²³ Jonathan Katz. *Gay American History*. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976), p. 23.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 212-213.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 213.
- ²⁶ Katz, pp. 25-26.
- ²⁷ Katz, p. 232.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 232-233.
- ²⁹ New York Times, Jan. 19, 1901.
- ³⁰ Caroll Smith-Rosenberg. "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America," *Signs*, 1, No. 1 (Autumn 1975), p. 2.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 27.
- ³² Katz, p. 129-130.
- ³³ Ibid., p. 131.
- ³⁴ Quoted in Dolores Klaich, *Woman Plus Woman: Attitudes Toward Lesbianism*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), p. 40.
- ³⁵ Rule, p. 34.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 35.
- ³⁷ Lillian Faederman. "The Morbidification of Love Between Women by Nineteenth Century Sexologists," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 4, No. 1 (Fall 1978), p. 79.
- ³⁸ Nancy Sahli. "Shashing: Women's Relationships Before the Fall," *Chrysalis*, No. 8 (1979), p. 18.
- ³⁹ Faederman, p. 84; Sahli, p. 21-22.
- ⁴⁰ Sahli, p. 21.
- ⁴¹ Sahli, p. 22.
- ⁴² Ibid., p. 25.
- ⁴³ Ibid., p. 25.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 26.
- ⁴⁵ Duggan, p. 81.
- ⁴⁶ Further research is needed that would trace the development of this class consciousness in lesbians and gay men.
- ⁴⁷ Smith-Rosenberg, p. 2.
- ⁴⁸ Blanch Weisen Cook. "Female Support Networks and Political Activism: Lillian Wald, Crystal Eastman, Emma Goldman," *Chrysalis*, No. 3 (1977), p. 48.

